

PLANTS AND ANIMALS - 1

■ Ra's creation

Animals and plants were often themes in the religion, jewelry, sculptures and wall paintings of the ancient Egyptians. They were considered part of Ra's creation of order, and the earthly manifestation of many of the Egyptian gods.

■ Marsh, farmlands, desert areas

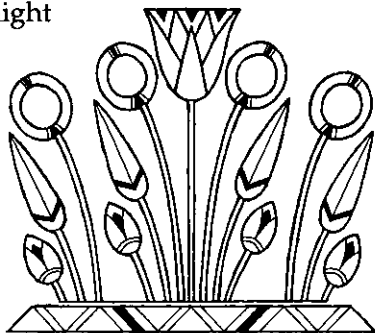
These three areas of Nile River and delta were home to a wide variety of plants and wildlife: papyrus and lotus (waterlily) plants, hippos, crocodiles, cobras, geese, ducks, ibis, cormorants, pelicans, Nile perch, and catfish. Near oases date palms, fig trees, and grapevines grew. While farmers tended herds of cattle, their farmlands grew barley and emmer wheat, flax, onions, garlic, leeks, beans, lentils, lettuce, melons, and cucumbers. The harsh desert areas east and west of the Nile River were home to vultures, falcons, jackals, lions, gazelles, and antelopes.

■ Papyrus

Thickets of this plant were common in marshy areas and along the banks of the Nile, a protective habitat for the waterfowl of the river. A versatile plant, Papyrus was used to make paper, sandals, boats, ropes, and even paintbrushes. The tender shoots of new plants were eaten as bamboo shoots are today. The hieroglyph of the plant was a symbol of "green"; it was used for such ideas as "flourish" "joy" and "youth."

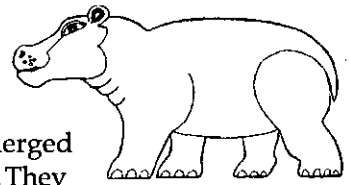
■ Lotus (waterlily)

Two types of lotus (waterlilies) were indigenous to ancient Egypt: the white (*Nymphaea lotos*) and the blue (*Nymphaea cerulea*). The sacred blue lotus was most commonly depicted in art and sculpture. Because waterlilies close at night and sink below the water only to rise again with the dawn, they became symbols of the sun and the creation from the waters of Nun.



■ Hippopotami

These large animals swam in the river, able to stay submerged for five to eight minutes. They were often underwater running on their toes across the bottom like inflated horses, or they floated near the surface with only their nostrils and eyes above water. Hippos would come ashore in herds to graze on the marsh vegetation and sometimes to devastate a farmer's crops. An ancient text reads, "Do you recall the unhappy lot of the farmer? When harvest time came, reptiles had taken half his crop and the hippopotami had eaten the other half." *Hippopotamus* is a Greek word meaning "horse of the river" or "river horse." Boatmen really feared this Nile animal. A bull could be 15 feet long and weigh as much as 8,000 pounds, but he was able to move through the water in short

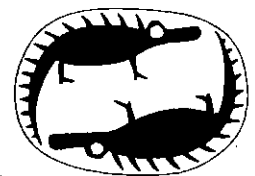


bursts of 30 m.p.h.. They were deadly when enraged, able to turn over large boats and crush sailors in their jaws. Tomb paintings show hippo hunts done much as whale hunting has traditionally been done, with harpoons and ropes.



■ Crocodiles

Also found in the marshy areas were crocodiles, many more in ancient times than there are today. Laundry, done at the river's edge, was a dreaded job for two reasons. First, since the Nile was considered a god, washing dirty laundry in the Nile made the god dirty. Those who defiled the god were considered ritually unclean. The crocodiles were the second reason Egyptians did not favor the job of launderer. They would stay submerged near the edge of the river and eat those trying to wash clothing in the water. It was traditional for those crossing the river in papyrus boats to chant spells so they might make it across without being eaten. Crocodiles were honored as the god Sobek and were often mummified in honor of the god of the Faiyum. Human mummies have been examined whose missing limbs appear to have been bitten off by crocodiles.



PLANTS AND ANIMALS - 2

■ Cobra

The Egyptian cobra or asp (*Naja haje*) was found throughout the Nile delta. Originally a sacred animal associated with the goddess Wedjat of the city of Buto, it became the symbol of all of Lower Egypt and of the pharaoh. In Egyptian art the cobra was usually shown rearing up with hood spread.



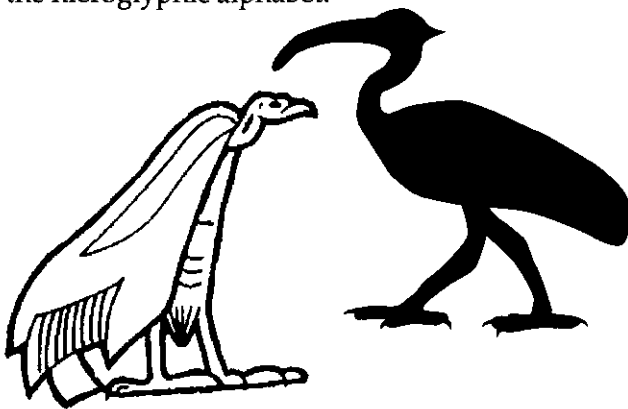
■ Waterfowl

Geese and pintail ducks were a favored food for wealthy Egyptians. The sacred ibis, storks, cormorants, pelicans, and herons were residents of the Nile River and the delta, feeding on Nile perch, tilapia and catfish. Although the Nile was teeming with fish, the wealthy did not eat them. Fish were considered ritually unclean and unfit for offering to the king and the temples or as meals for the dead. Regular Egyptians, however, ate what they had available, and sometimes all they had was fish.



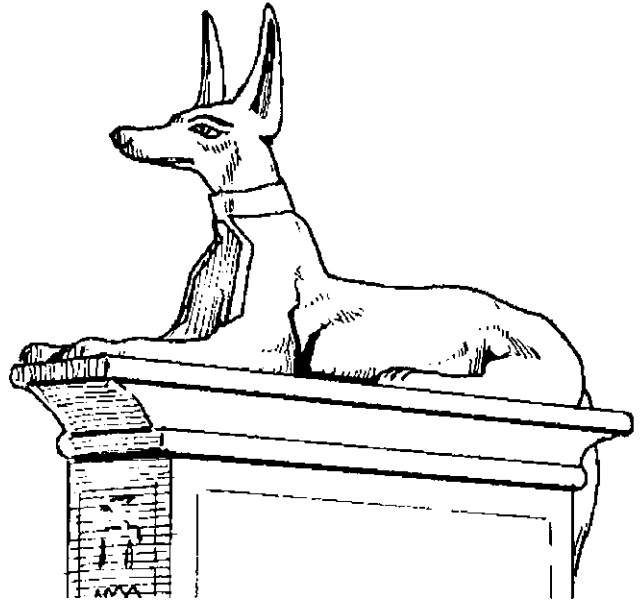
■ Desert birds and animals

Certain areas east and west of the Nile River were home to vultures, falcons, jackals, wild dogs, lions, gazelles and antelopes. At least five different types of vultures were known in ancient Egypt. A large bird similar to the griffon vulture (*Gyps fullness*) appears in most Egyptian art and as the representative of the goddess Nekhbet, the goddess of Upper Egypt. The so-called "Egyptian vulture" (*Neophron percnopterus*) represents the letter "o" in the hieroglyphic alphabet.

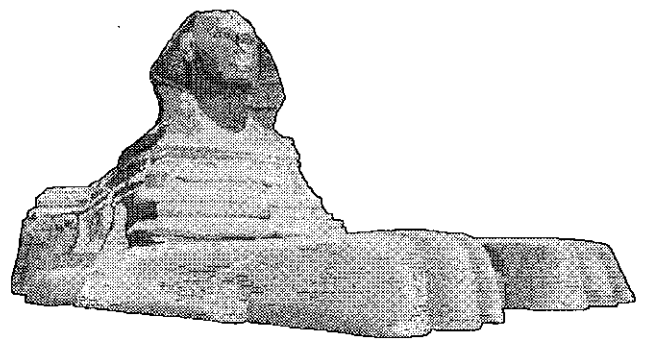


■ More animals

Anubis, the guardian of the Egyptian afterlife, might have been styled after the jackal, the wild dog



or a cross of the two animals that hung around the fringes of necropoleis and were seen to eat dead bodies. In ancient times, lions were found far down into Egypt, though now human population growth and industrialization has caused them to disappear from the lower reaches of the Nile. The Egyptians were very familiar with the lion as it stayed on the edge of the desert, seizing its meals from the herds grazing nearby. Considering the lion a noble animal, the Egyptians styled the sphinx in the form of



a lion and used lion metaphors to describe their pharaohs. As one text read, "Ramses II is a powerful lion with claws extended and a terrible roar." Finally,



the antelope was seen as belonging to Set, outlawed and persecuted. However, the gazelle, a type of antelope, was associated with the cataracts of the Nile and sacred to Satis, Lady of Elephantine, and to Anukis, wife of Khnum and mother of Satis.